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Original Research Paper

Management

REGIONAL VARIATIONS IN SHOPPING MALL SERVICE QUALITY PERCEPTIONS: THE ROLE OF DEMOGRAPHICS AND CUSTOMER ADVOCACY

Riya Ghosh* Indian Institute of Social Welfare and Business Management, Calcutta University, Kolkata - 700073, India *Corresponding Author

Dipa Mitra Indian Institute of Social Welfare and Business Management, Calcutta University, Kolkata - 700073, India

ABSTRACT Shopping mall has emerged as a very important retail format in India and an integral part in the lives of urban shoppers. Thus, service quality has become an important component critical for sustaining customer satisfaction. This study attempts to evaluate the service quality perceptions of shopping mall visitors in four major metropolitan cities such as Delhi NCR, Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai and establish the regional variations in perceptions of shoppers. Primary data is obtained from 525 mall visitors and the dataset is subjected to statistical techniques. The findings suggest significant regional variations in service quality perceptions of mall visitors, suggesting that both geographic context and demographic characteristics impact mall visitors' perceptions. Age and occupation emerge as the key demographic determinants across the regions. The customer advocacy levels vary across regions, with strong advocacy observed in Mumbai, average levels in Delhi NCR, and comparatively weak advocacy in Chennai and Kolkata. This study provides a novel contribution by comparing the service quality perception of Indian shopping mall visitors across four major regions. The study suggests that a uniform service strategy may not be suitable to address the diverse expectations of the shoppers. The findings provide valuable managerial insights for the shopping mall management for developing localized service strategies and thereby enhancing the shoppers' loyalty.

KEYWORDS : Regional Differences, Retail Service Quality, Service Quality Perception, Shopping Malls

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian retail industry is one of the fastest growing industries across the globe contributing 10% to the Gross Domestic Product of the country. Kushwaha T. et. al. (2017) said that there are several organized retail formats available, shopping mall being one such format. Shopping mall is described as a covered indoor shopping centre having very attractive architecture. The shopping centres house outlets of various well-established brands and also consist of entertainment options such as dining, movie theatres, salons, spas; they also have dedicated parking space for two wheelers and four wheelers. Over the last few decades, India witnessed extensive growth in the number of shopping malls owing to the rise in the disposable incomes, and change in taste and preferences of the shoppers.

Rukmani. B. et. al. (2019) said that the shopping mall plays a very important role in the lives of consumers, because they not only visit malls for the purpose of shopping but also to enjoy the cheerful and vibrant environment. One of the major factors for attracting the consumers to the malls is the availability of entertainment options. This makes it absolutely necessary for the mall management to have an in-depth knowledge of the shoppers' expectations and design services tailored to their needs. Owing to the rapid growth in the number of shopping malls, the standards of competition are also very high, making it difficult for the malls to survive. The rapid growth in the number of shopping malls has made the mall visitors split loyal in nature; they shift from one shopping mall to another without any hesitation. This necessitates identification of the service gaps and the areas which need immediate attention.

However, it is to be remembered that the strategies for the overall improvement of mall services should be specific to the regions, since culture and demographic factors play an important role in determining the expectations and perceptions of the shoppers. Shoppers' tastes and preferences, lifestyle patterns, age, income, and purchasing power significantly vary across places. Hence, adopting uniform strategies across all regions may not yield desired outcomes because customer expectations, preferences, and behavioral patterns vary significantly from one region to another. Therefore, mall management should design region-specific strategies by considering the consumption habits of the local consumers in order to ensure better alignment with the shoppers' expectations. Such localized approaches significantly enhance the shopping mall's competitive positioning within the specific market. Hence, the formulation of region-specific strategies is essential for ensuring sustained competitiveness in the evolving retail setup.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Impact of Shopping Malls on Consumers' Lives

Several researches explored the roles of shopping malls in the lives of consumers. Muhamed Y. (2017) said that the consumers considered shopping malls as a one stop solution for their needs, because they could find every category of product and varied brands under the same roof. However, Hameli K. (2017) said that consumers visited malls being attracted by the décor, entertainment options, variety of products and brands, ease of shopping, and opportunity for socializing. B. Nikitha et. al. (2018) opined that aggressive pricing offered at the malls and the convenience to getting all kinds of products under one roof enticed the shoppers to visit malls. However, Bawa et. al. (2019) suggested that visitors could be free from any kind of weather worry, once they entered the shopping mall, and this created an intense comfort and drove them to the malls. Ease of shopping, wide variety of products, the aesthetics and hedonic factors were also assessed by the shoppers before they visited the malls. Subsequently, Dwikayana I.M.D. et. al. (2021) evaluated the role of hedonic motivation and found that hedonic motivation significantly impacted the shopping experience at malls.

At a much later stage, Kumar D. (2023) determined the success factors of shopping malls and found that rise in the literacy level of the shoppers, exposure to various sources of media, availability of wide variety of products led to the success of shopping malls. However, the reason for visiting shopping malls was fun, browsing, heavy discounts. Misra P.K. et. al. (2023) said that safety provided to customers, efficiency and quality of service drove customers to the malls.

2.2. Importance of Shopping Mall Service Quality

There are several research papers which estimate the post purchase behaviour of shopping mall visitors. Falcão L.M.A.A. et. al. (2017) explored the service quality of shopping in Brazil using the SERVQUAL framework. They found that out of all the

parameters, empathy and reliability had the lowest averages. However, a cross-cultural study in the shopping malls of Morocco, Senegal, and Tunisia, where the shoppers exhibited significant differences in buying behaviour. Diallo M.F. et al. (2018) attributed this difference in service quality evaluation and buying behavior to the differences in culture. In similar lines, De Silva RTLA et. al. (2022) assessed the service quality of shopping malls with reference to the SERVQUAL model and found that tangibility, reliability and empathy significantly impacted the shoppers' perceptions. In the recent times, Ambadas T.G. et. al. (2024) assessed the evolution of shopping mall service quality management with the help of SERVQUAL and SERVPERF frameworks. It was revealed that organizational culture, training of the employees, changes in technology, evolution of consumer expectations, actions of the competitors impacted the consumer preferences. It was also learnt that globalization, rapid changes in technology taste and preferences of the shoppers posed major challenges to the mall management.

The prior studies show that service quality is a major determining factor for ensuring satisfaction of the shoppers and advocacy. The studies review the applications of service quality models like SERVQUAL, SERVPERF in various sectors. The service quality perceptions are found to vary across regions and countries, thus pointing towards the need for region specific approaches.

It is observed from the previous studies that they highlight the importance of regions and cultures in measuring service quality perceptions, but majority of studies have been restricted to a single geographical context. Moreover, the impact of demographic variables on shopping mall service quality perception have not been explored. Furthermore, very few studies have assessed the level of customer advocacy associated with mall experiences. These gaps motivate a region-wise comparative study to assess whether shoppers from different parts of India perceive the service quality of malls differently.

3. Objectives of the Study

In light of the rapid expansion of shopping malls and the growing regional diversity in consumer expectations, it is necessary to undertake a systematic empirical investigation. The present study is therefore designed to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the association between regional differences and service quality perceptions of shopping mall visitors
- To determine the impact of demographic characteristics of shopping mall visitors on their perceptions about service quality
- To assess the level of customer advocacy and loyalty across shopping malls in different regions

4. Research Methodology

A preliminary understanding of the operations of malls across the globe is developed by referring to a number of research papers, published articles, books, etc. This study focuses on the quantitative aspects of service quality of malls, and hence, primary data relevant to the study is collected. Dabholkar, Thorpe, and Rentz (1996) suggested that respondents provide meaningful responses when they are present in the actual environment, shopping malls in this case; hence, mall intercept surveys are conducted. The surveys are conducted face-to-face in several popular malls across the metropolitan cities of Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai. This aims to minimize single organization specific as well as self-report biases. The questionnaire is pretested and the respondents' anonymity is ensured to reduce the social desirability bias.

Simple Random Sampling is adopted to select the respondents for the study, taking respondents' willingness into consideration. Simple Random Sampling is done to ensure that every mall visitor has an equal chance of participation, thereby reducing the bias. A structured questionnaire, developed using Retail Service Quality Scale (RSQS) is adopted for primary data collection. The RSQS items are adapted to the Indian shopping mall scenario and validated with the help of multi-stage process. Five experts have confirmed that all questionnaire items adequately represent the construct, ensuring content validity. A pilot test with the help of 30 respondents is also conducted to assess the clarity and minor wording revisions are done based on their feedback. A total of 525 usable questionnaires from different regions is collected for the study, ensuring a relatively balanced representation from all the regions.

This study has adopted a quantitative research design. The primary data obtained from the respondents through structured questionnaire via mall intercept surveys is checked. SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software is used for analysing the data. Chi Square Test is conducted to determine the influence of regional differences on service quality perceptions. Subsequently, ANOVA test is conducted for all the four regions to assess the differences in service quality perception with reference to the demographic characteristics of mall visitors. In the next stage, Net Promoter Score is calculated subsequently to assess the level of customer advocacy and loyalty.

This methodological framework provides a robust basis for exploring the regional differences in mall service quality perceptions and thereby developing region-specific strategic priorities for the shopping malls.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the results of the empirical analysis and accomplishes the objectives of the study.

(i) Examination of the Influence of Regional Differences on Service Quality Perceptions of Mall Visitors

The following hypothesis is tested to determine the influence of regional differences on service quality perceptions of mall visitors.

H_{0A} = There is no significant association between region and service quality perception of the mall visitors.

H_{1A} = There is a significant association between region and service quality perception of the mall visitors.

Chi Square test suggests that the p value obtained is 0.000 which is less than the standard of 0.05; hence, the null hypothesis is rejected and it may be concluded that there is a significant association between service quality perception and region. The findings are appended in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1. Chi Square Test Indicating the Association Between Region and Service Quality Perception

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	147.687a	15	.000
Likelihood Ratio	159.490	15	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	68.980	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	525		
a. 8 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .20.			

(ii) Determination of the Impact of Demographic Characteristics of Shopping Mall Visitors on their Perceptions About Service Quality

The demographic variables considered in the study are gender, age, educational qualification, occupation, and family income per month.

ANOVA test is conducted to determine if there are significant differences mall visitors' service quality perceptions across

various demographic groups. In connection to this, the following hypothesis is tested.

H_{0B} = There is no significant difference in mall visitors' service quality perceptions across different demographic groups

H_{1B} = There is a significant difference in mall visitors' service quality perceptions across different demographic groups

The results of the findings of ANOVA test are presented below in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2. ANOVA Test Indicating the Differences in Service Quality Perception Across Demographic Groups

Demographic Variable	Delhi NCR (North)		Kolkata (East)		Mumbai (West)		Chennai (South)	
	F value	Sig.	F value	Sig.	F value	Sig.	F value	Sig.
Gender	-	-	-	-	6.651	.011	-	-
Age Group	2.397	.043	4.121	.001	20.064	.000	7.971	.000
Educational Qualification	-	-	-	-	13.128	.000	11.370	.000
Occupation	5.548	.000	35.878	.000	19.609	.000	9.810	.000
Family Income Per Month	-	-	10.799	.000	-	-	-	-

It is observed from Table 5.2 that gender has a significant impact only in Mumbai. Comparison of means suggest that the service quality perception is higher among female shoppers as compared to male shoppers. Age emerges as one of the most important demographic factors showing significance across all regions. In the shopping malls of Delhi NCR, perception is satisfactory for age groups 46–55 years and above 65 years age groups, while visitors aged between 36–45 years exhibit dissatisfaction. In Kolkata, perceptions are satisfactory for 46-55 and 56–65 years age group, average for 18–25, 26–35 and 36–45 years and dissatisfactory for shoppers above 65 years. However, in Mumbai, perception level is high across most age groups, except for the 56–65 years category, which reflects dissatisfaction. In Chennai, the mall visitors belonging to 18-25, 26-35, 36-45 and above 65 years age groups exhibit satisfactory level of perception, while shoppers in the 56–65 years category show unhappiness.

Like age group, occupation also shows its dominance across all regions. The findings show satisfactory perceptions for homemakers, average in case of students, service class, businessmen and 'others' category, and dissatisfactory in case of entrepreneurs in Delhi NCR. In Kolkata, dissatisfactory perception is primarily observed among entrepreneurs, visitors from other occupational groups report satisfactory perception levels. In Mumbai, most occupational groups positively respond towards mall service quality, with the exception of homemakers. In contrast, in Chennai, perception is satisfactory among students, businessmen and entrepreneurs, but comparatively lower among service class employees and homemakers.

Educational qualification plays a pivotal role in Mumbai and Chennai. In Mumbai, all groups except graduates, exhibit satisfactory perception. On the other hand, in Chennai, undergraduates and graduates report satisfactory perception, whereas the postgraduates and respondents belonging to 'others' category report lower satisfaction levels. Finally, family income per month shows significance only in Kolkata. It is observed that perceptions are satisfactory for income groups of 75,000–1 lakh INR, 1–1.5 lakh INR and above 1.5 lakh INR, average for the shoppers earning below 50,000 INR, and dissatisfactory for 50,001–75,000 INR income group.

(iii) Assessment of the Level of Customer Advocacy and Loyalty Across Shopping Malls in Different Regions

Shopping malls in India play a very important role in providing functional and psychological benefits to the mall visitors. In this regard, it is essential to gather in-depth knowledge about the customer satisfaction. The study determines the Net Promoter Score (NPS) for the shopping malls from the various regions to assess the level of customer advocacy and loyalty. The concept of Net Promoter Score was developed by Sir Fred Reichheld, who was one of the partners at Bain & Company. The following scoring categories are provided for reference in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3. Net Promoter Scores and Associated Categories

Net Promoter Score	Categories
-100 to 0	Need improvement
0 to 20	Good
20 to 50	Favourable
50 to 80	Excellent
80 to 100	World class

The Net Promoter Scores for each region are calculated and presented in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4. Net Promoter Scores for Shopping Malls of Each Region

Location of mall	% of promoters	% of detractors	Net Promoter Score
Northern India (Delhi)	42.30	25.96	16.34
Eastern India (Kolkata)	22.37	48.51	-25.74
Western India (Mumbai)	78.57	0	78.57
Southern India (Chennai)	2.803	6.54	-3.737

Net Promoter Scores indicate strong customer advocacy in Mumbai (78.57), while Delhi NCR shows moderate level of advocacy (16.34). On the other hand, negative NPS values for Kolkata (-25.74) and Chennai (-3.737) indicates a higher proportion of dissatisfied shoppers and insufficient customer experience.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examines the regional variations of service quality perceptions of shopping mall visitors in India and identifies the role of demographic factors in shaping the mall visitors' perceptions across four major metropolitan cities of Delhi NCR, Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai. The results provide important insights into the multidimensional nature of service quality in shopping malls and highlight the importance of region-specific strategies for improving the shoppers' experiences.

The findings of the Chi Square Test confirm that regional characteristics influence how shopping mall visitors evaluate their service experiences. This indicates the need for developing service strategies suited to the taste and preferences of the consumers in the specific regions. ANOVA test is conducted to determine the differences in shoppers' perceptions across the demographic categories. It is observed that age group and occupation emerge as very important demographic factors shaping the perceptions of mall shoppers in every region. In majority of the cities, the senior citizens exhibit dissatisfactory level of perceptions, while with respect to occupation, entrepreneurs and homemakers do not report satisfactory perception levels. These highlight the necessity for the shopping malls to develop more inclusive strategies that cater to the expectations of diverse demographic groups. Gender is found to have a significant impact only in Mumbai, with perception level being high among female shoppers but low amongst the males. Educational qualification plays an important role in Mumbai and Chennai. Family income per month is significant only in Kolkata; the income bracket of 50,001–75,000 INR reports dissatisfaction, suggesting that the malls in Kolkata need to

house affordable options for all income categories. In the next step, the Net Promoter Scores for the shopping malls in the different regions are calculated to determine the customer advocacy. The scores reveal strong customer advocacy in Mumbai, average level of advocacy in Delhi NCR and poor standards in Chennai and Kolkata. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening shopper experience management in regions where advocacy levels remain dissatisfactory. This study underlines the need for developing region-based mall service strategies for addressing the specific expectations of the shoppers belonging to a particular region. By integrating regional comparison with demographic insights and customer advocacy assessment, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of show shopping mall service quality is perceived across diverse urban markets in India. This study makes a major contribution to the mall service quality literature by comparing the service quality perceptions based on various regions of India.

With reference to the limitations of the study, this study is restricted to four major metropolitan cities of India. Further studies may be extended to the Tier II cities; also, the study may be conducted beyond the national borders to gain in-depth knowledge of the international mall operations. Such investigations may further enrich the understanding of service quality management in the rapidly evolving retail landscape.

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